



Dostoevsky and His New Testament

Geir Kjetsaa, University of Oslo

"I came from a pious Russian family. From my earliest childhood I remember the love of my parents. In our family we knew the Gospel almost from the cradle. " (1)

Scholars wishing to study the influence of other writers upon Dostoevsky are immediately confronted with numerous difficulties. Most of the books in his library were lost while he was abroad from 1867 to 1871. He had to build up his book collection from scratch. Thanks to the writer's wife, Anna Grigor'evna, we nevertheless have information about his collection of books from later years. (2) However, these lists contain fewer than a thousand volumes, which means that they represent only a fraction of the books the writer must have read. Furthermore, over the years the major part of his later book collection has been lost. A Dostoevsky scholar is therefore not in the same fortunate position as a scholar working on Tolstoj or Gor'kij, since the latter has the opportunity to study his authors' underlining and comments in preserved collections of books. (3) Besides *The Insulted and Injured* and *The Brothers Karamazov* we know today in fact of only one book which is furnished with comments and remarks in Dostoevsky's own handwriting. (4) On the other hand it is by far the most important book with which he was concerned, namely the New Testament.

Dostoevsky is known to have received this book as a gift from the Decembrists' wives in Tobol'sk in the middle of January 1850, when he was on his way to Siberia to serve his sentence for crimes against the state (XXI: 12). As "spiritual works" were the only books allowed in the ostrog (IV: 303), and as the writer had his own copy of the Bible stolen on the very first day, this gift came to have particularly great importance. "During the entire four years of his imprisonment Fedor Michajlovich never allowed himself to be parted from

96

this holy book, " says Anna Grigor'evna in her memoirs. (5) "Twenty years later when he recalled his sorrow and mental anguish, " she told one of her husband's biographers, "he used to say that the Gospel was the only thing that kept hope alive in his heart. Only in that book did he find support; whenever he resorted to it, he was filled with new energy and strength. " (6) "For four years it lay under ray pillow in the gaol, " the writer himself confirms. "From time to time I read from it and read aloud to others" (XXI: 12).

It is also indeed with strange feelings that one sits today in the Manuscripts Collection of the Lenin Library leafing through Dostoevsky's dirty copy of the New Testament. (7) Countless fleas and lice have crawled over the dark covers of the book. From the writer's bunk it witnessed din and uproar, the rattling and jangling of shackles, cursing and coarse laughter, shaven heads and branded faces, degradation and misery. But it was precisely in this earthly inferno that the book was to have such importance for the writer's spiritual rebirth.

This was the first time the New Testament had been available in Russian translation. Earlier there had only been the Old Church Slavonic text, which was still to be the only version used in church. The translation had been carried out by the most distinguished theologians in Russia; the master for the Gospel according to St. John was no less a person than the metropolitan

Filaret. (8) The price was 2 roubles and 25 copecks, so it is not exactly a cheap paperback we can hold in our hands. This solid book (620 pp., 18. 7 x 11. 4 cm) is bound in pure leather and obviously intended for daily use over many decades. Typically, this is the copy of the New Testament with which the author provides Sonja in *Crime and Punishment*, "It was the New Testament in Russian translation," states Raskol'nikov. "The book was old, well used, bound in leather"(VI: 242).

Well used, not to say badly worn, can also be said of Dostoevsky's copy. For example, the leather binding is damaged. Here the Decembrists' wives are known to have poked in a ten-rouble note, another gift that was good to have in the ostrog. Anna Grigor'evna says that the book was later always to be found on the writer's desk. "Often when he was deep in thought or in doubt about something, he would open the New Testament at random and read whatever was on the first page to his left," she says in her memoirs. (9)

97

The New Testament was also used in this way on 28 January (9 February) 1881 when Dostoevsky felt that death was fast approaching. At random the book was opened at page 6 where Anna Grigor'evna read the account of Jesus coming to John to be baptised. "Do you hear? 'Let it now happen' - *ne zaderzhivaj* (don't hold me back) - of course I am about to die," said the writer. Six hours later he had passed away. In his copy of the New Testament his wife also underlined this passage (Matt., III, 13-15) and added in the margin: "These lines were opened and read aloud by me at the request of Fedor Michajlovich on the day of his death at 3 o'clock. "

In addition to this underlining by Anna Grigor'evna we find almost two hundred other markings which must be supposed to have been made by Dostoevsky. More than half of these take the form of pencil marks in the margin. Sometimes, however, the writer felt the need for greater emphasis, for instance by adding one or more *nota bene* signs, or by underlining one or more words in the text, usually in ink. Finally we find one instance where Dostoevsky corrected the language of the text (the addition of "*by*" after "*ljubi*" in 1 Joh., IV, 21) and three cases where he commented on it with words in the margin.

When studying the individual marks we are perhaps struck by a certain surprise, not least at what Dostoevsky omitted to mark. Thus he has not marked the important words about atonement in the Epistle to the Romans nor the important words about the purpose of suffering in Peter's first epistle. The same also applies to the words in the Gospel according to St. Luke concerning the forgiveness of Jesus, and the central theme in St. Matthew concerning the forgiveness of sins, grace and mercy. Particularly striking is the absence of any marking of the Sermon on the Mount, except that is for the commandment that we shall not commit adultery, a commandment that the author stressed elsewhere as having the greatest importance.

Nevertheless we should not place too much emphasis on what Dostoevsky omitted to mark. The fact that he often read his New Testament at random suggests that for him all the verses in the book had great significance. In his works he often used numerous quotations from the Bible which are not marked in his copy of the New Testament. Examples which may be mentioned are the commandment that we shall love our neighbour as we love ourselves

98

(Matt., XXII, 39) at the end of *The Dream of a Ridiculous Man* and the saying that he who lives by the sword shall die by the sword (Matt., XXVI, 52) in *The Brothers Karamazov*.

It is of course more important to study those places which are marked. Although as a Bible commentator Dostoevsky is a man of extremely few words, it is obvious that his markings can

provide us with a pointer to which passages in the New Testament he considered to be particularly worthy of attention. Above all his underlining give us an opportunity to investigate how passages from the Bible influenced the author, how he so to speak made the words of the Gospel his own through his art as a novelist.

If we study the marked passages, we quickly notice that there were particular topics which must have captivated the author. Thus a striking feature is his underlining of Biblical passages which stress that the just are persecuted, that the day of judgment shall really come, that we shall obey the authorities, work diligently and pay our taxes, that we must beware of carnal pleasures and fight against our greed and avarice. Dostoevsky had altogether a clear liking for the chastening and admonishing passages in the Gospel. His markings give no support to the view that Dostoevsky is supposed to have represented a kind of moral relativism, a view which has for example gained ground among Western scholars who have read too much of Bakhtin. On the other hand the markings provide ample support for Rene Wellek, who in this connection gives the following character description of the writer: "He was a man of deep commitment, profound seriousness, spirituality, and strict ethics whatever his lapses were in his own life. " (10)

True enough, some of Dostoevsky's markings should perhaps be accounted for in terms of an autobiographical rather than an ideological explanation. When Paul asks Philemon to take care of his son whom he has begotten in his bonds (the Epistle of Paul to Philemon, 10-12), it is natural to explain the author's underlining in terms of his own anxiety for his stepson, Pasha, whom he had acquired in Siberia. Furthermore we note Paul's words of "self-praise" in the Second Epistle to the Corinthians (XI: 18-31) which Dostoevsky half humourously used when he praised his own writings himself in private letters (*Pis'ma*, II: 151} IV: 46). No doubt Timothy is not totally devoid of humour either: "Be no longer a drinker of water; but use a little wine for the stomach's

99

sake and thine often infirmities" (V: 23). Or as it says in the Russian text: "for your stomach and your frequent fits" (*dlja zheludka tvoego i chastykh tvoikh pripadkov*). His epilepsy meant that he had to be careful with alcohol, but a little drop was all right with Paul's blessing!

Of course greater interest is attached to the large number of marked passages in the Bible which can be related to the writer's novels. Among these is the account of the way in which Jesus drove the evil spirits into the swine (Luke VIII: 32-36), namely the epigraph to *The Possessed*. Further we note in the Gospel according to St. John (XI) the account of the way in which Jesus brought Lazarus back to life, the account that Sonja reads aloud to Raskol'nikov and which foretells the hero's rebirth in *Crime and Punishment*. Here we also find St. John's words about the grain of wheat that must fall into the earth and die in order to bear much fruit (XII, 24), the epigraph of *The Brothers Karamazov* and the epitaph on the writer's grave.

Altogether it is obvious that in spite of the fact that the marked passages distributed over 21 of the 27 books of the New Testament, Dostoevsky had a clear preference for the writings of St. John. In the Gospel according to St. Mark he only marked 2 places. The Gospel according to St. Luke is also poorly represented with 7 markings. For the sake of comparison it may be mentioned that he marked 6 places in the short First Epistle of John, 16 passages in The Revelation of St. John the Divine, and as many as 58 places in the Gospel according to St. John.

It is of course well known that the writings of St. John have always played a particularly important part in the Orthodox Church. It is not without reason that Vladimir Solov'ev in his *Brief Account of Antichrist* lets the three different forms of Christian belief each refer back to a particular apostle: Catholicism to Peter, Protestantism to Paul and Orthodoxy to John. In

addition, Dostoevsky probably had more specific reasons for his interest in the Gospel according to St. John. The fact that his Gospel knows only one commandment, namely the commandment to love thy neighbour, and that it defines sin as the rejection of Jesus is all in full accordance with the view of Christianity reflected in the works of Dostoevsky. Of even greater importance is the emphasising in the Gospel according to St. John of the fact that

100

Jesus is the one in whom the final revelation of God meets man. (11)

The full understanding of Jesus as God must have come relatively late to Dostoevsky. As a member of the Petrashevskij circle he had considered Jesus as an ethical ideal and noble reformer, but hardly as God. The metaphysical dimension in his picture of Christ was practically non-existent. Probably it was not until his period of imprisonment that the writer understood the significance of acknowledging this metaphysical dimension. Later he realized that the Arian heresy, that is to say the denial of the divinity of Christ, was the first step in the European process of secularization which process he saw as his calling to oppose. In his New Testament he characteristically underlined the words "I and the Father are one" (John., I: 30). "It is not Christ's moral code, it is not Christ's teaching which will save the world," he wrote in his notes for *The Possessed*, "no, it is precisely the belief that the Word became flesh" (XI: 187-188). It is also this idea which lies at the base of the famous Dostoevsky words that beauty will save the world.

In what follows I shall give a few examples of how the author's reading and understanding of the writings of St. John are reflected in two of his novels, *The Idiot* and *The Possessed*.

The significance of the Gospel according to St. John as the basis for *The Idiot* was already made quite clear in the author's much quoted letter to Sonja Ivanova:

"The main idea of the novel is to present the absolutely good human being. Nothing in the world could be more difficult than this, particularly in our time. All authors, not only our own but all European writers too, who have attempted to portray the *absolutely* good individual, have always given up. This is because the task is infinitely difficult. The good is an ideal, but neither among us nor in European culture has the ideal so far been permanently embodied. In the entire world there is but one absolutely perfect individuals Christ, and consequently the very existence of this infinitely good individual is in itself an incomprehensible miracle. The whole of the Gospel according to St. John came into being with this thoughts It finds the whole miracle in the incarnation of the good alone, in the perfect incarnation in flesh and blood alone (*Pis'ma*, II: 71}").

101

Like no other of the Evangelists John sees the miracle embodied in the Christ who preached love in an evil world. We particularly note Dostoevsky's marking of the following passages:

34. Заповедь новую даю вам: любите друг друга. Как Я возлюбил вас, так и вы любите друг друга. (S. John, XIII)

12. Сия есть заповедь Моя, да любите друг друга, так как я возлюбил вас. (S. John, XV)

10. Кто любит брата своего: тот во свете пребывает, и нет в нем преткновения. (I. John, II)

7. Возлюбленные! станем любить друг друга; ибо любовь от Бога, и всякой, кто любит, рожден от Бога, и знает Бога. (I. John, IV)

12. Бога не видал никто нигогда. ЕСТЬЛИ мы любим друг друга; то Бог в нас пребывает, и любовь Его совершилась в нас. (I. John, IV)

19. Станем и мы любить Его, потому что Он еще прежде возлюбил нас. 20. Кто говорит: я люблю Бога; а брата своего ненавидит; тот лжец: ибо не любящий брата своего, кототого видит, как может любить Бога, Которого не видит? 21. И заповедь мы имеем от Него таковую, чтобы всякой, любящий Бога, любил и брата своего. (I. John, IV).

Above all Dostoevsky interpreted the message of love conveyed in the writings of St. John as a commandment to show sympathy (*sostradanie*), "Compassion—that is the whole of Christianity," he wrote aphoristically in his notes for *The Idiot* (IX: 395). In the final editing of the novel this thought was even more strongly emphasized: "Compassion is the most important and perhaps the only law for the whole of human life" (VIII: 192).

The Christ-inspired Prince Myshkin may be considered to be an incarnation of this law of compassion. Just like Christ in St. John's Gospel he has come "from above, "

102

from mountainous Switherland to Russia, the land of steppes, where he immediately becomes an outsider, a confessor "not of this world. " He belongs to "the pure in heart, " feels compassion without hate and love without cruelty. Like Christ in John's Gospel he is a representative of a world with a different temperament. In him we meet virtue that is passive and which can only be achieved through humility and suffering. In contrast to Western emphasis on good *deeds* Dostoevsky places the main stress on man's compassionate *attitude*, or to put it in words from the Epistle to the Romans which the writer marked in in his New Testament: "In love of the brethren be tenderly affectioned one to another; in honour preferring one another!" (XII: 10).

The fact that action is accorded less importance than attitude obviously has consequences for the notion of sin. The formalistic view—that sin is the breaking of a commandment—must give way to the view that sin is the absence of compassion. The consequence is that sinful actions are more forgivable than sinful attitudes of mind, as actions are simply a necessary consequence of attitudes.

The Idiot provides a good illustration of Dostoevsky's view. The writer lets his anger loose on militant nihilists and hidebound atheists, people who have not accepted the commandment in the Gospel according to St. John to show love towards God and fellow human beings. Dostoevsky's underlining in his New Testament leave little doubt that for him this "sin of omission" is in fact the real deadly sin. Evidence of the writer's condemnatory attitude to such people is provided by his marking of the following passages: Peter's Second Epistle, II: 21-22? 1. Cor., XIII: 1; 2. Thess., II: 9-10; and it is put most briefly in 1. Cor., XVI: 22: "If any man loveth not the Lord, let him be anathema. Maran atha. "

On the other hand Dostoevsky is extremely tolerant of thieves, roughians and drunkards, that is to say people whom we normally define as riffraff but who actually do nothing worse than commit wrongful actions. As long as one is content to use fists and axes there is always the possibility of continued life in Dostoevsky's world. Like his ideal, Prince Myshkin is the friend of publicans and sinners. He feels more at home with the uncouth clown Lebedev and the drunken thief Ivolgin than he does with the grand pillar of society General Epanchin. His attitude to Nastas'ja Filippovna is obviously in-

103

spired by Christ's attitude to the woman sinner in the Pharisee's house, yet another passage which the writer underlined in his New Testament: "Wherefore I say unto thee, Her sins, which are many, are forgiven; for she loved much: but to whom little is forgiven, the same loveth little" (Luke, VII: 47).

This brings us to another important concept in this deeply religious novel, namely *forgiveness*. Not surprisingly we find among Dostoevsky's marked passages in the Bible Christ's words in Matt., XVIII: 22 that we shall forgive one another not seven times, "but until seventy times seven." Thus Myshkin forgives everything - cuffs on the ear, scorn, and slander—for him there is hardly any sin which is unforgivable. However, the distinctiveness of Dostoevsky also finds expression in the problem of forgiveness. While we strive to forgive one another, his characters struggle with a much more difficult task, namely to forgive themselves.

This is the problem that faces Nastas'ja Filippovna. She has had a deep mental wound inflicted upon her by her surroundings and especially by her seducer but in return for this wound all she wants is to be hurt again. First she punishes herself for the first humiliation through her feeling of guilt, then death is the final wound she inflicts upon herself as punishment for feeling guilty. She loves her shame and her guilt more than the forgiveness Prince Myshkin can give her, and she seeks Rogozhin's knife as the final justification of her contempt for others and herself.

The finale, where the prince tries to comfort Rogozhin by the bed of the murdered Nastas'ja Filippovna, is one of the most powerful in world literature. At the same time, however, practically all critics have taken it to be proof of the total defeat of the princely ideals in the world of earthly passions. Indeed, what has he really achieved by preaching and living up to his ideals of love, humility and forgiveness? Nastas'ja Filippovna has been murdered, Aglaja has had her happiness destroyed. If only he had stayed in the hospital in Switzerland, things would certainly have gone well for both of them.

This line of argument stems from people who, in contrast to Dostoevsky, put action before attitude. "It is results that count!" such people claim, shaking their heads when the writer lets the poor peasant woman

104

come to Zosima with a gift of 60 copecks for one who is poorer than she is. There is no item on the social welfare budget than can be covered by the sum of 60 copecks!

On the basis of purely rational considerations the critics are no doubt right. Naturally it can be argued that Prince Myshkin was a fiasco, just as Christ was a fiasco if we simply measure his activities according to pragmatic criteria. Neither Christ nor "Prince Christ" managed to prevent the injuries that human beings inflict on one another. The only thing they could do was to give people a picture of the best within themselves. However, once we stress the power of example, this too becomes of great value. True enough, the prince was unable to change the world, but through his attitudes he pointed to the vertical dimension, the making of the divine. The ideal itself is unattainable, but to strive for something less is not worth the effort.

Prince Myshkin's main virtue has been described by the Russian word *smirenje*. The word means the curbing of all passions, humility and spiritual peace, and therefore designates the opposite of the Greek *hybris*, which stands for pride, self-assertion and spiritual revolt. (12)

From preaching the Russian *smirenje* in *The Idiot*, Dostoevsky goes, in *The Possessed*, to attacking *hybris*, a Western disease which had also penetrated into Russia and which showed itself in the revolt of mankind against God. As a consequence of the changed purpose, the source of inspiration is different. The message of love in St. John's Gospel gives way to the exposure of the beast and the promise of salvation in The Revelation of St. John the Divine.

Dostoevsky's exegesis of the book's epigraph (*Pis'ma*, II: 291) shows that for him the murder of Ivanov was something more than a crime. In reality here was an exact parallel to the Gospel's account of Christ exorcising the evil spirits. Nechaev's crime was in his eyes yet another sign that Russia had entered the apocalyptic age of socialism. The arson and terror of the Paris Commune only served to strengthen him in his conviction that the day of reckoning was at hand, and he found the model for this reckoning in his New Testament.

From the mid 1860's one can observe in Dostoevsky an increasingly strong urge to see human beings and their actions in the divine perspective of the Bible. Every

105

single "natural" thought seems to have its special spiritual and divine counterpart. It is a silhouette of a spiritual thing, and this is again a portrayal of the original divine picture. (13) The markings in Dostoevsky's New Testament give a clear indication of the writer's tendency to give the Biblical stories "present-day relevance". Above all this applies to the underlining in the book where parallels between the original divine picture and the terrifying present seemed particularly striking, namely the Revelation of St. John the Divine. For Dostoevsky the Revelation was something more than a letter of comfort to the first Christian congregations. It was first and foremost an eschatological prophesy which was in the process of being fulfilled in his own time. "Antichrist has already been born... and he is on the way!" he said to Varvara Timofeeva in 1873. "He is coming! And the end of the world is approaching, faster than people think!" (14) In the grip of such apocalyptic images the writer also found in the Revelation the original portrait of the false prophet in *The Possessed*:

11. И видел я дурного зверя, выходящего из земли; он имел два рога подобные агнчим, и говорил как дракон. (Revelation, XIII)

Dostoevsky's laconic comment in the margin goes: "Social. " Obviously an abbreviation of "Socialism".

Indeed, that is precisely what he was like, that socialist Petr Verkhovenskiĭ, the second beast in the Revelation! With his two horns he is powerful, even though he is not so mighty as the first beast of the Apocalypse, Antichrist, with as many as ten horns. At the same time he wears the clothing of the meekest lamb, he clearly tries to copy Christ and indeed he is known to be a brilliant peace negotiator. However, beneath this appearance of similarity of mind with Christ is hidden the mind of the dragon, the devil's mind. He is a child of the dragon, a son of Satan. Typically he crops up for the first time in the chapter entitled "The Wise Serpent". His snake-like appearance should not deceive anybody either. His face seems sharp, he has small, waspish eyes and long, thin lips. His movements are rapid and energetic, his tongue gives the impression of being "unusually long and thin" with "a constantly flickering tip" (X: 144). Thus he speaks with the tongue of a serpent and betrays himself through the language of lies.

106

Nevertheless this little Satan is not a major character. On the contrary, he is wholly and solely in the service of another: "You are handsome, Stavrogin! (...) You are the leader, the sun, and I am simply your worm..." (X: 323, 324). Just as the second beast in the Revelation is in the service of the first beast and paves the way for its power, so Petr Verkhovenskiĭ also acts as a busybody and "minister of propaganda" (15) for Nikolaj Stavrogin, who in his turn is clearly modelled on the first beast. Of this first beast we are told that it has "ten horns and seven heads, and on his horns ten diadems", it is like "a leopard, and his feet were as the feet of a bear, and his mouth as the mouth of a lion". Finally we read that "the whole earth wondered after the beast".

These words accord well with the picture we are given of Stavrogin. Even his name contains the Russian word for "horn" (rog), and it is Petr Verkhovenskiy's dream to adorn Stavrogin's head with a diadem. Several times we hear of Stavrogin's power and strength. He has killed a man in a duel and crippled another with a gun; he could well have taken on a bear with just a knife, and he would not have been afraid to travel among robbers of the forests. When the writer describes his "savage recklessness" (X: 36) and "unnatural strength", (X: 43) he does so precisely by using verbs connected with beasts of prey. He "seizes" (X: 39) the nose of the highly respected Gaganov, he "gets his teeth" into the governor's ear (X: 43) and "tears" the grill from the prison window (X: 43). Another typical feature is the narrator's repeated remark: "Suddenly the beast showed its claws!" (X: 37, 38). In Dostoevsky's notes for the novel Stavrogin is also called a "beast of prey" (khishchnyj zver') (XI: 150).

His bodily strength however stands in sharp contrast to his inner weakness. Tortured by loathing and emptiness he has joined the revolutionaries, but he despises them most of all. Not even in this evil cause has this disbeliever any belief any longer. "When Stavrogin believes, then he does not believe he believes. And when he does not believe, he does not believe that he does not" (X: 469). Nothing new can ever come from this "lukewarm" man who has completely lost contact with his native earth and the people.

Judgment on this gloomy candidate for suicide is passed by the author when he quotes from Revelation (X: 497; XI: 11), which verses are also marked in his New Testament, obviously for use in the novel:

107

14. И Ангелу Лаодикийской церкви напиши: сие глаголет Аминь, свидетель верный, начало создания Божия: 15. знаю твои дела; ты ни холоден, ни горяч: о естлиб ты был холоден, или горяч! 16. Но поелику ты тепл, а не горяч и не холоден, то изблюю тебя из уст Моих. 17. Ибо ты говоришь: я богат, разбогател, и ни в чем не имею нужды; а не знаешь, что ты жалок, и беден, и нищ, и слеп, и наг. (Revelation, III)

In his worldly indifference he is not open either to faith ("hot") or to atheism ("cold"). What then is the reason for this gifted man's tragic fall? His downward progress from being the servant of God to being the servant of Satan appears in the book as a result of the great apostasy.

One of the passages that Dostoevsky underlined from Paul's Second Epistle to the Thessalonians (II: 3-12) speaks of the phases in what is to come in connection with the second coming of Christ: first the falling away, then the rule of the man of lawlessness (Antichrist), and finally Christ's battle and victory.

In *The Possessed* the great apostasy is displayed in the person of Stepan Trofimovich, Stavrogin's teacher and Petr Verkhovenskiy's father. He is portrayed as a typical representative of the generation of the 1840's — a liberal idealist with charming but dangerous thoughts of utopian socialism.

With his high-flying ideas he can indeed arouse "the eternal holy longing" (X: 35) in his pupil Stavrogin. But these semi-atheistic ideas cannot form any bulwark against the demonic forces of the human mind. On the contrary they simply create the right conditions for the growth of nihilism. What were still dreams during "the falling away" become under "the rule of the man of lawlessness" terrifying reality.

Stepan Trofimovich is himself the first to admit his fatherly responsibility for this. "I admit that Chernyshevskij's fundamental idea is right, " he says when reading *What is to be Done?*, "but that only makes it more horrible! It is our own idea—we were the first to plant it, to nurture it" (X:

238). Probably it is his acknowledgement of his own guilt which later causes his fear of being swallowed by the beast he himself has helped to create. When at the end of the novel he is

108

transformed into a bearer of the author's belief that Russia will one day be cured of its ills, we hear that he "kept seeing in his dreams a mighty open mouth with huge fangs, and that this troubled him greatly" (X: 492).

This open mouth with the huge fangs gives the true picture of the rule of the man of lawlessness. True enough, on the surface it may have something paradoxical about it. The revolutionaries want to organize the world, but cannot even manage to organize a meeting; they want to preach universal love, but hate one another like the plague; they want to attack religion, but content themselves with letting a mouse appear in a picture of a saint and sticking pornographic pictures into the stock of a woman travelling around selling Bibles. In other words, mere vandalism! But it is precisely this apparent harmlessness which brings the movement proselytes among "ordinary people". After all, one must show tolerance, stretch out a helping hand to the young, and stop them on the edge of the precipice!

It is not only against this naive flirtation with the dregs of Western civilization that Dostoevsky directs his satire in *The Possessed*. In their boundless naivete these unreflecting people are unable to see through nihilism—they are unable to see the contempt for human beings which lies hidden beneath the outer shell of "harmless" scandals. But it is precisely by their tolerant attitude that "ordinary people" contribute to promoting the false civilization's designs on the holy Russian soil.

Dostoevsky's comment on Chapter XVII in the Revelation seems to give support to this interpretation. In this Chapter the meaning of the beast's seven heads is explained. "Here is the mind which hath wisdom," we read in verse 9. "The seven heads are seven mountains, on which the woman sitteth." By the word "mountains" Dostoevsky put a little cross, and in the margin there is the comment: "civilization's" (*civilizacii*). The great whore thus sits on "civilization's mountains". Rome, urbs septicollis, in theological commentaries usually interpreted as the seventh, antichristian kingdom, becomes in the eyes of the author civilization's "seat" for the great whore, the symbol of apostasy and infidelity. The view of Western civilization as a hotbed of sinful depravity is also clear in Dostoevsky's statements to Varvara Timofeeva, in which he specifically mentions Rome (16). The writer wanted to fight

109

against any transplanting of this civilization onto Russian soil because it was a source of infection that threatened Russian faith. "Is it possible to have faith when one has become civilized, i. e., has become a European?" is the question posed in his notes for the novel (XI: 178).

The fact that there are already many people who have been infected by this contagious civilization simply creates the basis for the further spread of nihilism. "And the beast that was, and is not, is himself also an eighth, and is of the seven; and he goeth into perdition." To this enigmatic statement in verse 11 the author added: "man in general" (*obshchechelovek*). In this way "ordinary people" are associated in the writer's conscious mind with Antichrist: they are held responsible for his evil deeds because they do not actively try to fight against them.

What about the third phase in the Apocalypse - Christ's battle and victory? Naturally Dostoevsky can only give hints here.

In his New Testament Dostoevsky marked the following words in the Revelation:

4. И увидел я престолы, и сидящих на них, и дано было им судить; и души обезглавленных за свидетельство Иисуса, и за слово Божие, которые не поклонились зверю, ни образу его, и не приняли начертания на чело свое, и на руку свою: они ожили, и царствовали со Христом тысячу лет. (Revelation, XX)

The only one who refuses to worship "the beast or his image" in *The Possessed* is Shatov. It is not enough that he refuses to worship Stavrogin, he challenges him, rises up against him in open war. It is Shatov who inflicts upon the beast the wound that is mentioned in the Revelation (XIII: 3), and which the author dwells upon several times in his notes for the novel. True enough, the beast's "death-stroke was healed," and for challenging Stavrogin, Shatov must also lose his earthly life. On the other hand he clearly belongs to those who on the day of judgment shall be living and be admitted to the kingdom of Christ for a thousand years.

A more thorough analysis of the marked passages in the Bible and their impact in the works of Dostoevsky should be left to Dostoevsky scholars with training in

110

theology. My aim here has been to give some concrete examples of the significance of the Gospel for the author. Right at the end of his New Testament, Dostoevsky marked the following words from the Revelation "I am the Alpha and the Omega, the first and the last, the beginning and the end" (XXII: 13). The same could be said of this "eternal book" that followed the writer from the cradle to the grave, and which became a constituent force in his writing.

NOTES

1. F. M. Dostoevskij, *Polnoe sobranie sochinenij v tridcati tomakh*, t. XXI, Leningrad 1980, p. 134. In what follows, references are made to this edition directly in the text; Roman numerals indicate volumes, Arabic numerals are used for pages. Dostoevskij's letters (*Pis'ma*) are quoted from the four-volume edition from 1928-1959.
2. L. P. Grossman, "Katalog biblioteki Dostoevskogo". In the author's book: *Seminarij po Dostoevskomu*, Moskva-Petrograd 1922, pp. 20-53. And in: L. P. Desjatkina, G. M. Fridlender, "Biblioteka Dostoevskogo (novye materialy)". In the book: G. M. Fridlender (ed.), *Dostoevskij. Materialy i issledovanija*, t. IV, Leningrad 1980, pp. 253-271.
3. Concerning Tolstoj's library (approx. 22, 000 volumes), see *Biblioteka L'va Nikolaevicha Tolstogo v Jasnoj Poljane. Bibliograficheskoe opisanie*, Moskva 1972-; for Gor'kij's library (approx. 12, 000 volumes), see E. Prokhorov, "A. M. Gor'kij-chitatel". *Literaturnaja Gazeta*, 22/XII-1982, No. 51.
4. In the book by V. S. Nechaeva (ed.), *Opisanie rukopisej F. M. Dostoevskogo*, Moskva 1957, p. 271, mention is also made of *Sobranie povestej, rasskazov i stikhotvorenij N. Kurakina*. However, the markings in this book have "absolutely nothing in common" with Dostoevsky's handwriting. (Reported to the writer by T. I. Ornatskaja in a letter from G. L. Bograd of 1/III-1983.)
5. A. G. Dostoevskaja, *Vospominanija*, Moskva 1981, p. 375.
6. Quoted from N. N. Kuz'min, "Evangelie F. M. Dostoevskogo". *Ezhemesjachnye sochinenija*, 1901, No. 1, p. 68.
7. GLB, fond 93/I, K. 5b. /1, *Evangelie. Gospoda nashego Iisusa Khrista Novyj Zavet*. Pervym izdaniem. Sankt-peterburg, V tipografii Rossijskogo Biblejskogo Obshchestva 1823. As a guest of the Gor'kij Insti-

- tute of World Literature (IMLI) I was given the opportunity in the summer of 1982 to study the book, and in this connection I should like to express my sincere thanks to the head of the Manuscript Division, L. V. Tiganova. In this work all the Biblical passages are copied from the above edition of the New Testament, although the spelling has been modernized; English translations are taken from the following edition: *The New Testament of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ Translated out of the Greek*, Oxford 1881.
8. See A. Osipoff, "Publication of the Russian Bible", *Bible Translator*, 1956, Hf. 7, pp. 56-65; "More About the Russian Bible", *ibid.*, pp. 98-101; also Josef Schmid (ed.), *Moderne Bibelübersetzungen*. Sonderdruck aus der *Zeitschrift für Kath. Theologie*, 1960, Bd. 82, Hf. 3, pp. 28-29.
 9. A. G. Dostoevskaja, *op. cit.*, p. 375.
 10. Renē Wellek, "Bakhtin's View of Dostoevsky: 'Polyphony' and 'Carnavalesque'". *Dostoevsky Studies*, 1980, Vol. 1, p. 37.
 11. See Jacob Jervell, *Ingen har sturre kajaerlighet... Fra Johannesevangeliets Jesusbilde*, Oslo 1978.
 12. See Edward Hallett Carr, *Dostoevsky. 1821-1881*, London 1962, p. 163.
 13. In a stimulating article Czesław Miłosz has suggested that Dostoevsky was influenced here by Swedenborg's doctrine of correspondences ("Dostoevsky and Swedenborg", in the author's books *Emperor of the Earth. Modes of Eccentric Vision*, Berkeley 1977, pp. 120-143). In support of his hypothesis Miłosz mentions, for example, that in Dostoevsky's library there were three books by Swedenborg, all published by A. N. Aksakov in Leipzig, in 1863, 1864 and 1870 respectively. Nevertheless there are things which suggest that Dostoevsky did not become familiar with these books until later. Thus one of them is provided with a dedication from A. N. Aksakov dated 8 January 1877 (see *Literaturnoe Nasledstvo*, t. 86, Moskva 1973, p. 78). As late as 1875 Dostoevsky does not appear to have known N. Aksakov (see *Pis'ma*, III, 169, 347). On the other hand he owned a French commentary on the Apocalypse, which may have had significance for *The Possessed*: *Apocalypse du bienheureux Jean dūvoilūe, ou Divulgation de la doctrine secrète du christianisme*, par Adolphe Bertet, Chambéry 1870. This book appeared for the first time in Paris in 1861; it is not known which of the editions was to be found in the author's library

112

(see G. M. Fridlender, *op. cit.*, p. 267).

14. V. V. Timofeeva (O. Pochinkovskaja), "God raboty s znamenitym pisatelem". In: *F. M. Dostoevskij v vospominanijakh sovremennikov*, t. II, Moskva 1964, p. 170.
15. The second beast is described precisely in this way in relation to the first beast in Charles Bratsch, *Die Offenbarung des Heiligen Johannes und Apokalypse*, 2. Band. Zürich 1970, p. 130.
16. V. V. Timofeeva, *op. cit.*, p. 169; [Serguei Stremilov](#).



University
of Toronto

© International Dostoevsky Society ·
Contact Us